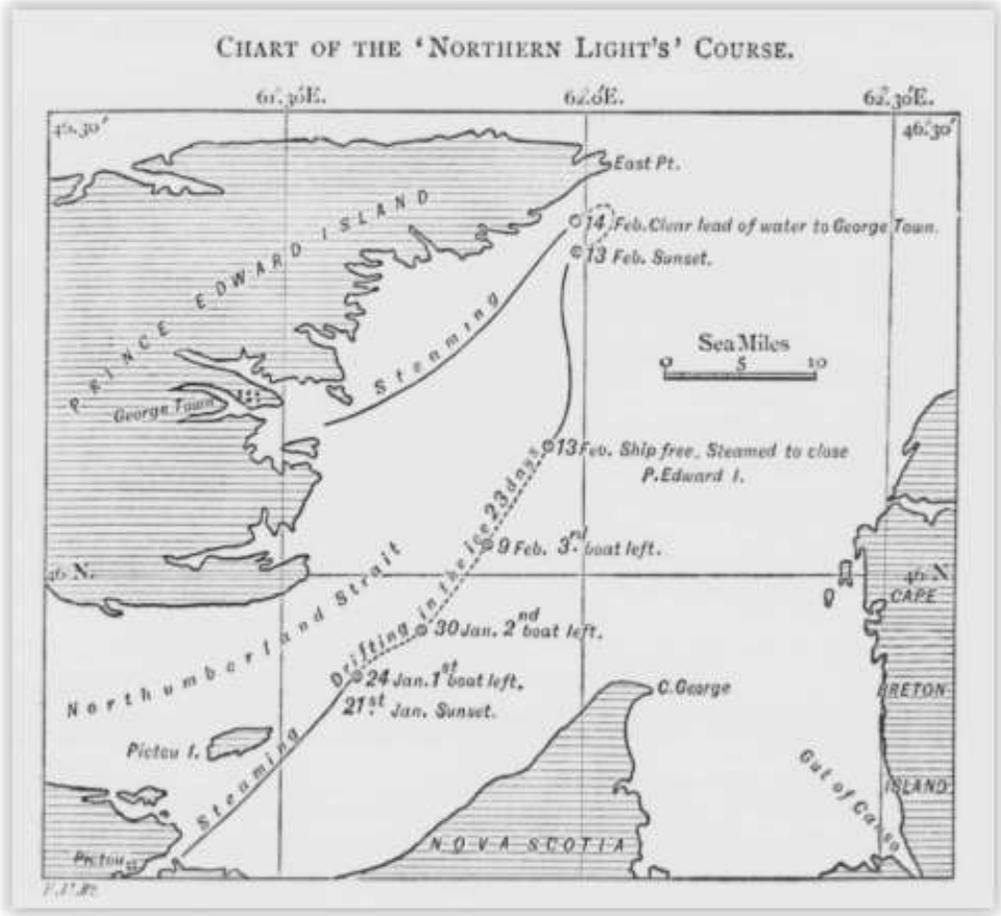


A Voyage in the "Northern Light"¹



DURING the winter months, all communication between Prince Edward Island and the mainland by ordinary vessels is closed by the dangerous ice which at that time fills Northumberland Strait, and renders navigation impossible, except by specially constructed craft. Any one whom chance at this time compels to travel from one side to the other has the choice of two routes—one by the Dominion Government Ice-steamer 'Northern Light,' running as opportunity offers between Pictou, in Nova Scotia, and Georgetown, on the island, a distance of about 45 miles, the other by ice-boats between Cape Traverse on the island, and Cape Tormentine on the mainland, a distance of about 9 miles. However, it generally happens that no choice offers, for while the 'Northern

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Light' commences running as soon as navigation is impossible for the ordinary passenger steamers, the ice-boats do not generally start work until the ice has prevented the Northern Light being relied upon for a daily trip. Roughly the steamer runs up to about the 20th of January, and again from about the 10th of March, till navigation re-opens, while the ice-boats commence about the 15th of January, and run till about the 10th of April, the dates of course changing with the character of the winter.

Being compelled to reach Halifax (N. S.) on a certain day, and finding the ice-steamer at the time somewhat erratic in her movements, owing to an immense and unusual quantity of ice in the Strait, I determined on what is known as "the Capes route," my decision being influenced by the fact that the postal authorities had determined to use the same route for the transmission of mails. Accordingly, on the 14th of January, I left Charlotte Town at 3 P.M., by train for County Line station, whence sleighs are procurable for Cape Traverse. The 31 miles being safely negotiated, a stay of an hour was necessary while the sleighs were getting ready, and at 6.30 we (for I was fortunate enough to find a friend travelling the same way) left for Cape Traverse, the night being luckily brilliantly lit up by a moon nearly at the full. As ours was the first trip of the season, the track, which later on is plain and well worn, was at this time only existing in the imagination of our drivers, as the snow was lying in all its virgin purity so deep that only the top rail of the fences was visible in many places, and our horses had to stagger along generally well up to their bellies. This being the condition of the track, it is not to be wondered at that the thirteen miles from the railway to Cape Traverse occupied fully four hours, and as the thermometer was somewhere about zero, we were, in spite of numerous fur-coats and rugs, heartily glad when the lights of Muttart's hotel announced the end of our journey. Here we found accommodation for the night, and having learnt that there was every probability of an early start and a good crossing, we slept the sleep of the just, in a small four-double-bedded-room, through which the stove—pipe passed from the room below and diffused an uncomfortable degree of unwholesome warmth.

Seven the next morning found us up and eager to start, and a few minutes later the boats' crews appeared, and preparations commenced in earnest. The ice-boats themselves may be described, as far as description is necessary, in a few words: they are simply flattish-bottomed boats, 15 to 18 feet long, and about 5 feet beam; they are fitted with two keels, 15 inches apart, which, while the boat is on the ice, act as runners and convert her into a sleigh. For convenience of hauling out of the water and on to the ice, they have flat bows (like a Chinese sampan) carried well aft and this enables them also to take the water again more comfortably than would a boat with the

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ordinary stem. For hauling on the ice, a number of leather belts are fitted with manila attachment to the thwarts, and each man of the crew, as well as each passenger, has one of these told off to him these tow-lines answer another purpose, for should any one in dragging fall through the ice, the strap will bring him up. Everything being in readiness, a start was made from the house at about 8 A.M the two boats being drawn by horses as far as the condition of the “board,” or shore ice, rendered practicable, and after that crew and passengers in the dragropes hauled them over till water was reached. This dragging, even on smooth ice, is sufficient exercise to put the blood in good circulation, and do away with the necessity for any extra clothing, care, however, being taken to protect the nose and ears.

At the edge of the board ice, we found the tide running past at about a knot an hour, but the clumpets of ice passing at the same time gave quite a novel experience, making one feel, for a second or so, quite giddy; however, the Captain launched us out, and the four boatmen taking their places, away we pulled, the skipper very cleverly availing himself of the lanes of water to make progress as nearly in the required direction as possible. When no passage appeared, out jumped the bowman, painter in hand, on to the ice, then followed the crew and last of all the passengers, and all being once more harnessed, away we go again, over the field ice till water once again compels us to take to the boat. On smooth ice the boat goes along easily and rapidly enough, but where big pieces (clumpets) have been piled one upon another, the labour is hard and the progress slow. The hardest work is getting the boat through what is called “lolly” a composition of half-frozen water, mixed with half-melted snow, with an occasional floating cake of ice, the whole packed too closely together to render pulling practicable, yet not firm enough to bear a man's weight; through this it is only possible to make way very painfully and slowly with boat hooks and paddles, and the lolly is consequently the bug-bear of the passage; we were lucky enough to get over with a good deal of open water, and not much lolly, as our journey was accomplished in three and a half hours to the board ice on the mainland shore.

The passage, as a rule, is made in about four hours, sometimes, however, taking six or seven or more, and much less frequently taking a little over two hours. The board ice on this side was very heavy, big clumpets sticking up everywhere, with the intervening space filled with soft snow several feet deep, and here one may get pretty severe bruises from slipping through the snow till the shin-bone brings one up on the sharp edge of a piece of blue ice. The only danger in crossing on a fine day is from frost-bite, or getting wet through falling through the ice; but as a rule care will prevent the former, while the latter is guarded against by keeping one hand on

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the gunwale of the boat, while tracking and standing by to throw the weight on to the boat should the ice appear treacherous.

We arrived at Cape Tormentine about noon, and here we had a somewhat rough but very welcome meal preparatory to another sleigh drive of 40 miles to Amherst, the nearest station on the Intercolonial line. About 17 miles from Cape Tormentine a stay is made at Port Elgin to change horses, and the whole journey from the Cape to Amherst occupied about seven hours. We arrived at the latter place about 8 P.M., just in time to escape a very heavy rain storm, which lasted three days. As we took train here the novelty of the journey ceases, to be resumed on our arrival at Pictou for our trip by the 'Northern Light' to Georgetown.

Since taking the above trip I have made another crossing, and in the interval some very important improvements have taken place. The Prince Edward Island Railway now runs down to Cape Traverse, and the whole journey from Charlotte Town takes two hours. A very fair hotel, the Lansdowne, has been built there, affording good accommodation. On the mainland again a line is contemplated, I think partly graded from Cape Tormentine to Amherst, and when this is completed the Capes route will have lost one of its greatest terrors, a cold sleigh drive of 40 miles. As to the actual crossing, the accidents are very few and very far between. Thirty years ago a party was out, I think, three days, and at last made the mainland nearly opposite Charlotte Town, one man, a young medical student, having died; while another, now a popular medical man in Charlotte Town, lost both feet at the instep from frostbite. In January 1885 three boats left Cape Traverse, and, being caught in an easterly snow storm, had to remain out all night on a pan of ice, with the temperature at 16 deg. below zero. They burnt one boat and a bag of newspapers, and finally landed late on their second afternoon. Of these men few escaped without some injury—one man lost both hands and feet, while others lost fingers, toes, or portions of hands or feet. Still I believe I am right in saying no mail has ever been lost, and this speaks volumes for the skill and pluck of these men who, during the hardest months of the winter, form the only link between Prince Edward Island and the main.

On my return journey I arranged to go by the ice-steamer from Pictou in Nova Scotia, to Georgetown on Prince Edward's Island. When I arrived at Pictou I found that the 'Northern Light' had not come in, and I had to wait there five days for her. The heavy rain, which commenced just after our arrival at Amherst, had at Pictou, and in fact all over Nova Scotia,

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caused such a silver thaw as had not been known for five-and-twenty years. The rain falling at a very low temperature, had frozen on everything as it fell, and the telegraph wires particularly presented a most unusual spectacle, as they had a coating of at least half an inch of clear ice, the wires themselves being plainly visible like the thread as seen in a string of crystal beads. All along them, too, were small pendant icicles, and the weight of this collection of ice was in many places so great as to break the wires. Near Pictou there is a road running between large willows, and as every tiny twig had its coating of ice, the effect, as one drove through with the setting sun glinting upon these thousands of little mirrors, was one of singular beauty, an effect that the proprietors of ornamental trees will be indeed sorry to see repeated, as the broken branches which strewed the roads showed how disastrous this silver thaw had been.

At last, on the 20th of January, the steamer arrived, and that same evening we went on board to be ready for an early start. I was lucky enough to get a cabin, a matter of some little difficulty, as, owing to the delay, passengers had been collecting at Pictou for a week back; so that, when we came to count heads, it was found that we had forty-seven passengers, while the vessel only afforded sleeping accommodation for eighteen, so that the majority had to sleep where they could, some on the saloon deck, some on the tables and lockers, and "others elsewheres," as Punch's cabman has it. Of the forty-seven passengers, five were women, and one a baby girl of eighteen months, the private property of the writer; in fact my business in Halifax had been to meet my wife, who, with the above-mentioned child and her nurse, were now on board.

At 7 A.M. on the 21st of January, we left the board ice at Pictou and proceeded on our way, following the lanes of water as well as we could, occasionally coming across fields of eight-inch ice through which the vessel had to cut her way. Into ice of this thickness, with a run of 60 or 70 yards, she can cut about her own length, and has then to be backed to ram the ice again and again till a passage is cleared. Working on in this way, we got on so well that we had a fair prospect of making the trip before dark, but about 4 P.M. we got among field ice at least 12 inches thick, and out of this no way was visible. The vessel was rammed at this, but the progress made was so slight, that it was thought wise to wait till next morning for a better opening. The shock with which the vessel came against this thick ice was so severe that it was difficult to keep one's feet, and it most certainly proved the great strength of the vessel and the confidence of her commander, Captain Finlayson, that she should come out of these charges, made at full speed, altogether uninjured.

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We had by this time arrived within about 8 miles of the island shore, and 20 miles from Georgetown, so our prospect was a good one. Next day (Saturday), however, we found her firmly fixed in the pack, and had to be content with breaking the ice round the vessel, so that should an opening occur we might be ready for it. On Sunday the 23rd, no opening came, so we had to make ourselves as happy as we could. This was hard enough, for the field had drifted much closer to the island, and the contemplation of the land where we would be was not cheering when separated from it by impenetrable blue ice. This Sunday is marked in my mental log by the remarkable fact, that a passenger with a fiddle, who had since leaving Pictou, played jigs, apparently without stopping even for necessary food or sleep, was compelled by his ignorance of sacred music to maintain an unwilling silence; but this so preyed on his mind that he remained up till midnight, when he recommenced his secular strains; remembering that he, poor fellow, had no place to sleep in, it seemed hard to deprive him of his pleasure, so he was allowed to go on in peace.

On Monday morning (the 24th), the prospect being still as bad as ever, one of the two ice-boats belonging to the Ship was lowered on to the ice and sent ashore with sixteen passengers (of whom the fiddler was one) and six of the crew, the latter being sent to bring the boat back. This party reached the Shore, about 7 miles off, about I P.M., having started at 8 A.M. and all, save for some slight frost-bites, were well. The boat returned to us on Thursday the 27th. During her absence, and to raise our drooping spirits, we started games of football on the ice, using a small ball of old clothes for the usual "leather." The ship during this time was closely packed and drifting with the ice slowly to the eastward.

On the 28th a movement of the ice caused the ship to be heavily nipped, the field on one side remaining stationary, while that on the other kept pressing against the side. Remembering that the ice was quite a foot thick and was being forced on the ship by the movement of a field extending as far as the eye could reach, some idea may be formed of the Strain to which the vessel was subjected. The beams kept up a dismal creaking and bent up in some cases a couple of inches, and the ice cracked with frequent loud reports, as, unable to force the ship, it gave to the weight behind it and piled in big blocks alongside.

The awful part of this nipping is the feeling of utter helplessness with which you see it. Nothing you can do with any human assistance appears likely to help, and there you stand, watching as

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calmly as you may the struggle between this natural force and that you have to pit against it; you know either you must give way or the ice must, and you anxiously wonder which it is to be. However, after about an hour of this, the running ceased, the beams gradually resumed their normal positions, and all of us breathed freely once more, thankful to that Providence which had rescued us.

On this day it was deemed advisable, not knowing how long we might be imprisoned, to reduce our daily three meals to two, and these were not to include fresh meat, that luxury being reserved for the baby, a luxury, by the way, that she enjoyed all through our detention in the ice, and to which I suppose she owes the fact that she came out of this adventure alive.

On Saturday (the 30th of January) the ice-boat left again at 7 am. with fourteen passengers and eight crew, the shore then being distant about 9 miles. This party was not as lucky as the first, for night came on before they reached the shore, and so they camped on the ice under the Ice of the boat. Some of the passengers were with difficulty kept from sleeping, while others stamped monotonously up and down until daylight showed them the land, distant about 2 miles, with a narrow strip of lolly separating them from the board ice. This lolly was so thick, that weary as they were they found themselves utterly unable to force their boat through it, so leaving her on the ice, they all struck out with boat-hooks and oars struggling for the shore, and sometimes knee deep, sometimes up to their necks, and sometimes lucky enough to get on a clumpet sufficient foothold for another spring, they all at length came safe to land.

Of this party several were badly frost-bitten, one so seriously that it was at first feared that he must lose both feet, but careful nursing brought him through with only the loss of a couple of toes; however, he never was himself again, and died a few months later. The boat was afterwards recovered by some people from the shore, but she never came back to us, and we were much exercised about her, as the signal fire they were ordered to light on their arrival was never shown, and consequently we were much afraid that ill had befallen them.

The day after the departure of the second boat-load we had at 5 A.M. the heaviest nip to which the vessel has during her five years' work been subjected, and the iron beam running across between the boilers was bent and displaced so much, that on the ship's recovering herself, the beam drew its bolts and remained in its maimed condition, a monument to the severity of the

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strain. Another beam farther aft was also considerably injured, and after this nip, too, the vessel commenced to leak considerably, but not sufficiently to be dangerous, as the donkey pump could clear the ship working twenty minutes a watch, or two hours a day. The iron beam to which the ship's safety on this occasion was principally due was put in, I believe, at Capt. Finlayson's suggestion, after the Ship's first season's work as an additional protection in her weakest spot.

All this time we were drifting slowly but constantly to the eastward, and after another week's monotonous confinement it was determined to send away the ship's sole remaining ice-boat and she accordingly left on the 9th of February with eleven passengers, of whom two were women, and three of the crew. This reduced our number to nineteen in all, or allowing for the three women, the child, and a sick passenger, thirteen all told to work the ship, and of these not one was rated a seaman. This last party started for the shore, then distant about 13 miles at 7 A.M., and they were out all night, reaching Georgetown at 10 the next morning; luckily the women, one of whom had walked two-thirds of the way, while the other insisted upon being dragged in the boat, were well; but some of the passengers and a fireman were badly bitten; the latter's bite, I presume, is mainly attributable to the nature of his occupation having made his feet tender.

Shortly after this diminution of our numbers, the ice ahead of us opened showing a long lane of water, from which we were separated by about 20 yards of solid ice and a "pan." Or, ice island about 50 yards in diameter; the latter we hoped to be able to move bodily. We commenced to cut the ship free, contenting ourselves the first day with sawing and breaking out the surface ice for 2 feet all round the ship, and hauling the broken pieces up on the main pack so as to leave the vessel clear; we also cut away the ice about 9 feet from her stem, so as to allow the ship to move her engines. After the departure of the last load of passengers we had found it necessary, or wise, to reduce the food allowance to one full meal at 1 P.M., and this with work on the ice from 7 A.M., was little enough. Working every day we managed by the 11th to cut a strip of ice out, relieving the pan or ice island already mentioned; this we afterwards started with screw-jacks and pinch-bars, and wind and tide moved it clear for us, so that now we only had the 20 yards of ice to clear away between us and a lead which extended as far as the eye could reach,

During this day's work, the writer, with his usual handiness, walked into a hole with an 8-foot iron bar, and, not having sense enough to let it go, he stood a fair chance of accompanying it

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below the ice; but the skipper's voice warned him of the folly of this proceeding, and he was hauled on to the ice a colder, a wetter, and, we hope, a wiser man. Every one but the sick man and the women helped, and, as the latter did the cook's and steward's work, these men shared in the labour of ice-cutting.

By the afternoon of the 12th of February we had managed to cut a passage 25 feet wide from the ship to the water, and so we tried the ship's engines. The motion of the vessel started the ice under her bottom, and it came up choking our canal. These lumps we got rid of at last, but one was so big that it had to be smashed up into three pieces before it could be cleared; and, as this lump took twelve men working hard an hour to move out, its size may be guessed at. To realize the nature of the work of clearing a passage, it is necessary to point out that the ice here was packed lump under lump below the surface ice, and was in many places quite 20 feet thick, though, of course, when the upper cake (generally 3 or 4 feet thick) was started, a good deal of the rest came up, but some pieces could not free themselves and remained partly under the surface ice and partly jutting into our canal. Of the lump we had so much bother with, I can only call it a small berg, which, when cleared, floated quite 3 feet out of water, indicating a thickness of, at least, 15 feet.

It was night when we had completed our passage and cleared it, so, although we had a good moon, we determined to leave her where she was till daylight. All that night it blew a whole gale from the S.E., and, as the ship's head pointing through our passage was N.W., we found it clear in the morning, and the wind had opened a good deal more water, so we got up steam. Just five minutes before steam was up, the ice on our quarter opened; but, unfortunately, the released field, influenced by the wind, swung right across our poor little canal, and after a week's labour we were barred again. Any one wishing to know what a sudden depression of spirits is, should try and fancy himself in our position. At one moment a straight opening to a patch of clear water of unknown extent, at the next all our hopes smashed—our chances of escape all vanished. However, it wasn't as bad as it might have been, for in a short time the ice again swung, our canal once more appeared, and, steam being all ready, our good ship forged ahead out of the cradle in which she had lain for over three weeks.

On we went through the lanes of water, making what progress we could and in any direction, so that we approached the island, for coal was now scarce, and our one object was to make the

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island board ice anywhere. By 3 P.M. we had worked up to within 4 miles of the island shore, but the loose ice, blown up from the south-eastward by the last night's gale, now lay closely packed against the island board ice. One good thing cheered us here—namely, the certainty that now at least our island friends knew where we were, and we felt sure that every effort would be made to bring us ashore.

All Sunday afternoon and night we kept steam handy and availed ourselves of every opening; but still we were gradually setting towards the east end of the island, distant at sunset about 7 miles. What was to happen if the drift took us beyond East Cape with little food, little coal, and little chance of help from the island, I think none of us cared to look into too closely. During the night the watchful care of our skipper in availing himself of every chance, kept us fairly in position, and we hoped for good resulting from a strong N.W. breeze which was likely to set the ice from the island shore, and give us a chance of clear water inside. During this night the writer gave another instance of his peculiar handiness. The ‘Northern Light’ has often to steam astern with much ice in her track, and, to prevent accidents which might easily happen from her rudder coming in contact with ice during sternway, a strong clamp of iron passes round the drum of her wheel and is controlled by a firm pressure on a footplate near the helmsman.

The writer, in the absence of the crew with the ice-boats, was at the helm and was perfectly acquainted with the peculiarities of the situation. Once, and only once, his mind was allowed during sternway to travel to the joys of reaching land, when in a second the wheel took charge, flew round, and slung the wretched scribbler of these lines violently against the opposite side of the wheelhouse. I said he forgot himself once; with this reminder of his fault it is not necessary to say that it did not occur again. Valentine's Day broke upon us fine and bright, and, to our great joy, showed us a clear strip of water bordering the board ice, and in this, with high spirits and thankful hearts, we steamed smoothly along at about nine knots an hour, making fast in the board ice at Georgetown at A.M., twenty-four days out from Pictou.

As we entered the harbour we picked up an ice-boat, and I was surprised to recognize in its crew the very men who just that day month had taken me across the straits. The agent of Marine and Fisheries, alarmed for our safety, had ordered this crew up from Cape Traverse, to attempt the relief of the ship, as our provisions were known to be short. Four years later I crossed the straits with the skipper of this crew, and he said in speaking of the incident: “What we wanted to see

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was the baby, and when they held her up we would have cheered, but we were too glad to see her alive to think of it." If their hearts were full, what were ours when at the end of this cruise, we said good-bye to those who had been our companions during a 46 miles passage of twenty-four days? To Captain Finlayson and his officers, we owe much, and they know our gratitude is theirs.

Perhaps the greatest personal hardship I had to undergo during this cruise was the deprivation of tobacco for a fortnight, and this is a trial, the severity of which, none who read this can understand, unless (being constant smokers) they have been placed in similar positions. My tobacco lasted about ten days, and as we always hoped to get out in a day or two, I did not cut down my expenditure until too late to make the reduction of any practical use in prolonging my enjoyment. After about a week of hopeless longing for the solace of a pipe, I accidentally heard that the second mate, who was ashore with one of the ice-boats, usually carried tobacco in his chest, and as he was the captain's brother, I tried to prevail upon our commander to examine the box. However, it proved to be locked, but my evident disappointment conquered the captain's scruples, and the bottom of the chest was taken off, and we discovered two figs of what under ordinary circumstances I should have considered unsmokable tobacco, but which now was a veritable treasure; brother smokers will understand how it was shared out and enjoyed. The memory of the pipefuls then carefully smoked will remain with me longer than that of any "Old Gold," or "Straight Cut No. 1" I've consumed before or since. Had we had more tobacco, no doubt our reduced allowance of food would have seemed more ample, for I well remember, how, when encamped for a lengthened period, as part of a shipwrecked crew, on a desert island in the Indian Ocean, the fact of our having a plentiful supply of the fragrant weed staved off the pangs of hunger, which naturally and frequently arose with an allowance of four ounces of biscuit, and half a pound of meat.

FRANK HASLEWOOD².

² Frank Haslewood (b.1847) was a British naval officer with the rank of Navigating Lieutenant who was living in Charlottetown at the time of the events described and was most likely attached to the Admiralty Hydrographic Survey unit under Captain Orelebar. Although not published until 1888 the events described occurred in 1881. Prior to coming to Prince Edward Island Haslewood had served in Australia where he had married Anne Edith Lupton. The child noted in the account was Madeline Haslewood born in Australia in 1879. What is not mention and what may account for the decision not to send his wife ashore was the fact that she was pregnant and would give birth in July 1881.